

CUISINE

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Autumn Entertaining

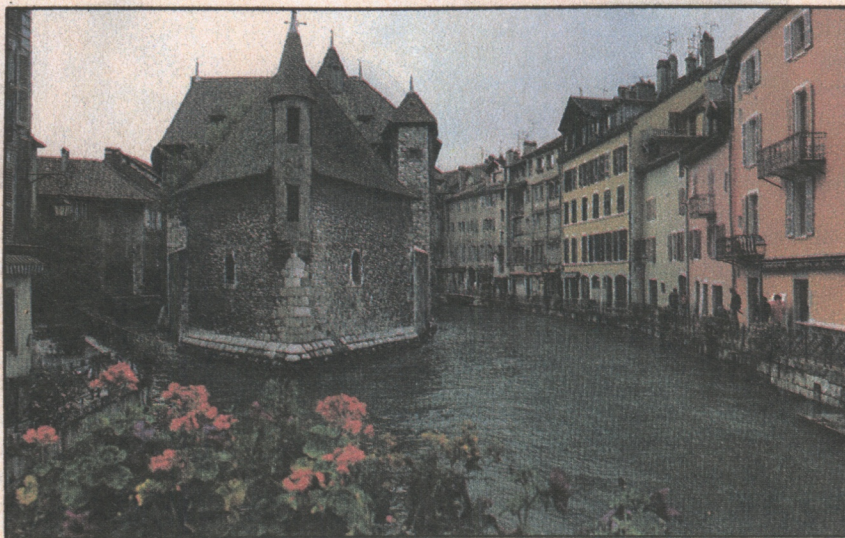




Woman with a Vision

Madeleine Kamman returns to France
and the culinary bounty of Haute-Savoie

BY NAO HAUSER
Photographed by Robert Freson



Hurrying along the helter-skelter narrow streets of the old city, Madeleine Kamman is the object of attention of the good citizens of Annecy. She does not walk a straight line. Her gaze darts every which way. She clasps her hands in contemplation before a shop window stocked with antiques or books. Then she scurries on, biting her lip, ready to do battle with a butcher whose chickens have caught her eye. With no less urgency she stares up at the sky to name the clouds, steps into the chilled silence of a Gothic church, and detours around Lake Annecy to take in the surrounding mountains.

Often her teenage son, Neil, lopes behind her, looking around at the patched masonry of the old buildings, the swans in the city's Italianate canals, and the other kids in the street. Usually several American cooking students tag after, laden with parcels of meat, cream, and bread. From their zigzag course from grocer to baker to wine shop, across the stone bridges and under the arcades, you'd think they were taking inventory of every merchant in town.

Indeed, they are. Paris-born Madeleine has focused new attention on

Madeleine Kamman—chef, teacher, and author—in her new kitchen in Annecy. Above: The waters in Annecy's canals have lapped at the buildings in the old town since its beginnings in the Middle Ages. The rough stone bulk of the old prison looms in the gathering dusk.

Three graduates of her cooking school in Boston, (left to right) Deirdre Davis, Jimmy Schmidt, and Stephen Heller, pay a visit to their mentor. Opposite: Ingredients for Polenta au Four with Fricassee de Champignons. The cheese is raclette; the mushrooms include yellow chanterelles, brown-capped cèpes, and the dangerous-sounding but innocent black "trumpets of death."



Annecy. In the summer of 1980, after twenty years in the United States, she moved her Modern Gourmet cooking school from Boston to a modern apartment with a large kitchen in this capital of Haute-Savoie. Here her American students learn about French food amidst opulent ingredients and scenery. Madeleine's genius as a chef, no less evident in her Annecy kitchen than it was in Boston at her cooking school and her restaurant, *Chez la Mère Madeleine*, is to anticipate tastes like sunlit dreams. And her brilliance as a teacher is in retracing the components of taste through her perceptions of history, art, and the natural world, as well as food chemistry and cooking techniques. To this task, Madeleine devotes eighteen or nineteen hours a day—reading, planning lessons, shopping, cooking, and working on a fourth cookbook. [She has written *The Making of a Cook* (1971), *Dinner Against the Clock* (1973), and *When French Women Cook* (1976).]

Return to the Source

Being in Savoie makes it easier than it was in Boston. The autumn markets overflow with flavors of the earth: gold and black chanterelles; fat, flat cèpes; slabs of orange pumpkin; bunches of herbs and field greens; butter with the sour-grass smell of Alpine pasturage. There are blood-red peaches, rose-quartz grapes, and pears that mimic fall foliage. In an American classroom, Madeleine talks in vain about the pleasures of sour and bitter tastes to students raised on sugar and salt; here she need only offer them a salad of fresh tarragon or chicory or a bit of crème fraîche and raw-milk cheese.

There is less struggle to dream, too, when Lake Annecy sparkles blue in the sun just meters from the marketplace. The city belongs to swans and geraniums and to an extremely affluent assortment of industrialists and entrepreneurs whose parks and mansions face the lake. The area once belonged to the House of Savoy, which governed from Turin across the Alps, until it was ceded to France in 1860, during the last stages of Italy's unification. But the Italian connection endures not only in the old canals but also in the graceful lines and pastel

stucco of some of the modern lakeside architecture. On a clear day, Madeleine stands at the lake and feasts on the mountains. "Look at La Tournette and Le Parmelan," she exclaims. "See, there's Mont Veyrier and Les Dents de Lanfon!" And her blue-jeaned students lift their eyes to the majesty of the peaks.

Leading her disciples through the old section of town, Madeleine points to stone walls with their venerable installations of shops and houses, to indicate the many eras visible in the present. "This facade is fifteenth century, the next is seventeenth." At a corner built in the eighteenth century she announces with reverence, "That dates from the Revolution." Then she takes her charges past the house of Madame de Warens, "the mentor of our dear friend Jean Jacques Rousseau." Through Madeleine's high-pitched chatter, the young Americans become intimates of Rousseau and revolutions. Glimpsing these animated history sessions, the denizens of this city that Madeleine calls "the most bourgeois in France" might suspect another revolution afoot.

Little do they know how many plots are hatched in the chef's sunny apartment! It is Madeleine's mission to be engaged in reinventing French cuisine—and not according to fads and fashions, but by crafting a historical and technical lens through which to perceive ingredients anew. As a French chef in Boston she was continually frustrated by the need to focus her French heritage on American ingredients. Since no revolutionary can remain in exile without losing touch, Madeleine, who combines the tender ingenuousness of an artist with the tenacity of a guerrilla fighter, moved her household back home, this time to stake out the French Alps for the most comprehensive teaching program offered anywhere and to establish a restaurant that will challenge the Michelin galaxy.

When her American friends and former students come to check on Madeleine *in situ*, they find the same gregarious lady kicking off her shoes and dancing with ideas. "Jimmy, you will come with me to the market. Stephen, we have to make the breads. Didi, do you think this chicken will be enough? I have the cheese and I can make a salad with the peppers. You know,



the plums are so good now; I'll make jam and a *pogne* [the local name for a yeast-dough tart] for supper.

"How is my stock coming? Did anyone check? You know something, I had an idea"—in a sudden clatter, she pulls out antique faïence and pink linen cloths—"these plates will match the tablecloths in the new restaurant, don't you think? Stephen, we'll have to go and buy more of these.

"Jimmy, I have to go order the fish for tomorrow. Didi, what did you think of the mountains yesterday? Eh, wasn't that something! That was really beautiful. You know, I could make the polenta for Neil. He loves polenta. But first I have to see that insurance man—you know, it's impossible to do business with the French. Then we'll go."

Reunited for a visit, Modern Gourmet graduates Jimmy Schmidt, Stephen Heller, and Deirdre Davis look at each other and laugh; with Madeleine nothing has changed. In Boston she opened three separate paths to them: Stephen came to France for six months to assist her, Deirdre went on to college to study food history, Jimmy went to the kitchen of the London Chop House in Detroit. She taught them how to grow, and she herself continues to grow here in Annecy.

A Culinary Pilgrimage

The road to COL DES ARAVIS winds about thirty-five kilometers east from Annecy through frosted peaks covered with straight pines at one level and pastures pinned with brown sheep beneath. Madeleine looks radiant as the car ascends the mountain. At the top she breathes deeply, savoring the ice-blue expanse of Mont Blanc, the highest peak in the Alps, some forty kilometers away, then continues on down the mountain to collect a chef's souvenirs. The jangle of cowbells heralds her

first stop, as a herd of sleek cows sway and chew in roadside concert. Signs announce their commercial calling: *Le bon Reblochon au chalet* and *Reblochon, vente ici*. Madeleine makes a stop at the farm, where the smell of the ripening Reblochon leads her into the barn. As if wishing to congratulate Fleurette, Jeunesse, and the other Tarentaise ruminants on a job well done, she stuffs her bag with rich cheeses—fourteen francs each, at the same time priceless—before descending farther to the town of THÔNES.

For lunch at the NOUVEL HÔTEL DU COMMERCE in Thônes, she orders a menu of regional classics: a rustic salad of spinach embellished with bacon and hard-cooked eggs; *farcement de Thônes*, a potato pudding sweetened with prunes and accompanied by *la cochonnaille*—sausages and slabs of country ham; a portion of *oeufs à la neige* that covers a whole plate; and *le gâteau de Savoie*, a light, dry, sugar-sprinkled sponge cake. "Ah, this is the country!" Madeleine sighs. "Everything is plentiful." Especially the cheese course, which induces a sense of indulgence as if the first of a lifetime, with youthful Reblochon, the more ponderous and deeper Tomme de Savoie, Bleu de Bresse, and chèvre of all kinds, including a mock Camembert.

Another day, Madeleine pursues the sour warmth of whey culture into the cooperative dairy of FRANGY, a village twenty-five kilometers northwest of Annecy. The dairy produces eight 160-pound wheels of Emmental daily, along with eight-ounce white rounds of Plaisir de Savoie. One would think Madeleine had never received another gift so grand as the small plastic cheese mold presented by a dairyman who is charmed by her attentiveness, and after she leaves the dairy to stroll along the vegetable patches, flower beds, and vineyards of adjacent roads, she takes out the mold to examine it. Thoughts of cheese-

making adventures at home pique her imagination—and build her appetite for today's classic lunch, this one served before the stone fireplace of LA CAVE DE LA FERME.

Here, tender, peppery sausages simmered in wine are followed by fresh bitter greens, a luxurious cheese course, and wild raspberries drenched with cream. With such ballast, one can drink local wines with abandon: simple white Roussette de Savoie, the more aromatic Seyssel, and a Mondeuse, a light red poured like laughter to complement the rich cheese. Afterward, there is the fire of Marc de Savoie (a clear distillate of grape), the country cousin of more subtle *digestifs*.

A Visit to Chartreuse Country

Madeleine's interest in philosophy, coupled with the proximity of LA GRANDE CHARTREUSE, headquarters of the Carthusian Order, prompts a visit to the imposing monastery isolated from the world by the white limestone cliffs of the Massif de Chartreuse, less than two hours away in the historic region of the Dauphiné. The road borders pine forests and deep gorges. It leads to three stops on the Kamman pilgrimage.

The first is the distillery in VOIRON, where three Carthusian brothers oversee the production of Chartreuse, the green liqueur that pampers worldly digestion at the same time it provides income for the monasteries. Only the monks are allowed into the herb room, where, it is said, some 130 species of Alpine flora are blended according to the secret Chartreuse recipe that is well over 200 years old. But laymen handle business and promotion, including visitors' tours, which include the stills, oak casks, and aging vats. Madeleine beams at the samples offered in the hospitality room built over the fragrant cellars. Chartreuse has always been her after-dinner preference.

From Voiron the road leads up to the CORRERIE DE LA GRANDE CHARTREUSE, the building that houses the museum of the monastery. While examining a display model of a monk's cell, she weighs the monks' commitment to silence, prayer, and self-sufficiency. Recordings of Carthusian chants are the only sensory celebration in the cold stone halls. But outside, beyond the gardens and the chapel, the procession of fleecy clouds around chipped and broken summits defies the isolation of the hermitic walls.

In the dining room of the HÔTEL DE CUCHERON, a few kilometers around the mountain at COL DU CUCHERON, chartreuse-colored cloths and napkins greet the tourist. The plastic lace curtains and mock stained-glass shutters are meant to soften the austere view of limestone slabs. The scenery, however, is inviolate, and the menu features foods that are the special resources of this wild and undeveloped area: wild mushrooms presented generously in a coarse pâté, trout caught in the river behind the restaurant and held for the sauté pan in a stone pool.

Opposite, left: *Local wines—Crépy, Mondeuse, Chautagne—and local cheeses, (at top) Emmental; (upper crate) Tomme de Savoie in two sizes and a small cheese of cow's and goat's milk; (lower crate) a stack of Reblochons with assorted chèvres.* Right: *The market in Old Annecy. This page, top: Assiette Tiède de Poissons de Lac, on an antique faïence platter from Madeleine's collection. Bottom: Pain Sucré des Grandes Fêtes Religieuses, here in a long loaf, and crown-shaped Pain du Saint Sacrement, with sweet local butter and Madeleine's own apricot and currant jams.*





For well over two hundred years, the inhabitants of the monastery of La Grande Chartreuse alone have possessed the secret for making the famous green liqueur Chartreuse. Opposite: A brother monitors the distillation process at Voiron. This page: La Corriere de la Grande Chartreuse, the monastery museum, houses exhibits depicting the life and history of the Carthusian order.

Madeleine scrapes the casserole to polish off a golden gratin of potatoes. The cheese course is white satin: individual *petits faisselles* of fresh curds fermented naturally, without rennet, and served in a bowl of the richest cream. Any overindulgence is quickly remedied by a glass of Chartreuse. Madeleine stares out the window at the bleak altitude of Charmant Som. Then she rests her sight closer and explains, "I love the pine trees that stand alone."

The Fruits of the Quest

When Madeleine returns to her kitchen to prepare the cuisine of Savoie and Dauphiné, it is apparent that she perceives her surroundings as a palimpsest. Sometimes she rubs away contemporary images to reveal a more vivid past. In the ascent to Col des Aravis, Madeleine sees more than mountainsides dotted with cows and ski chalets. She sees there the locus of two rich breads, *pain du Saint Sacrement* and *pain sucré des grandes fêtes religieuses*, both of which were baked locally for church rites until World War II; so she revives the recipes. In the Annecy market, along the canals, Madeleine sees license to mate an Italian salad of red peppers and potatoes with verbena-scented lamb. She buys polenta, which was introduced to the city by migrant Italian laborers, and prepares it according to the pilaf method (*sautéed* and steamed) traceable to a valley in the Massif de Chartreuse. She perceives the forests as a treasury of mushrooms and hazelnuts, Lake Annecy as the source of sublime salmon trout; she takes advantage of the season to prepare *fricassée de champignons* and *assiette tiède de poisson de lac*. In the sweet fish, the colors of the mushrooms, the bosky scent of toasted hazelnuts, the freshness of chervil, and the deep flavor of nut oil, she captures the essence of an autumn day.

Says Deirdre Davis of her teacher's recipes, "They are personal statements. She's interested in everything; she's always moving, changing, and adapting. It would be false to assume that her food would be any different."

In late afternoon, Madeleine summons her students to prepare for tomorrow. She must polish her lens before morning brings the market into view again. "Come, Jimmy, Didi, we will go walk along the lake," she says. "I will go look at the mountains."

POLENTA AU FOUR

Makes 8 servings

- 4 cups hot Chicken Stock (see recipe, page 37) or Rich Veal Stock (see recipe, page 71)
 - ½ cup unsalted butter
 - 2 onions, finely chopped
 - 1½ cups yellow cornmeal
 - 1½ teaspoons salt
 - ⅛ teaspoon freshly ground pepper
 - 1 cup heavy cream
 - ½ cup grated Swiss raclette or Italian Fontina cheese
 - Fricassée de Champignons (optional; recipe follows)
- Heat oven to 350°

1. Make Chicken Stock.
2. Heat butter in large heavy saucepan over medium heat until it turns light brown; do not let butter burn. Immediately add onions. Cook, stirring frequently, until onions are softened and translucent, about 5 minutes.
3. Add cornmeal; stir to coat with butter. Stir in 4 cups hot stock in slow steady stream. Heat, stirring constantly, to boiling; reduce heat to low. Cook, stirring frequently, until mixture pulls away from sides of pan and leaves smooth indentation when

(continued)

Itinerary

Although it is only sixty-three miles from the large industrial and commercial city of Lyon and eighteen miles from the world-renowned spa at Aix-les-Bains, most signs in ANNECY point in the other direction, toward nearby Switzerland. Despite this Swiss orientation, Annecy (in the *département* of Haute-Savoie) is a remarkably French town, little influenced by foreign customs and exhibiting no need for self-definition. It seems only natural, then, that road signs show the way to a neighboring country. After all, the citizens of Annecy know who and where they are.

Certainly there are tourists (most are French); happily there are children (summer camps abound in the cool mountain climate); and taste and tradition are essential elements of life here.

The fortunate traveler who already knows Annecy may have discovered its charms during a pleasurable lunch en route to the ski areas, at a summertime picnic beside LAC D'ANNECY with the castle of the counts of Genevois providing a medieval backdrop, or in the sharing of a basket of perfect strawberries purchased from a roadside vendor. As for newcomers, Annecy charms them in an equally gentle and leisurely manner.

How to Go: It is a seven-hour trip to Annecy from the Gare de Lyon in Paris via two direct trains daily; there are also a number of trains to Lyon with connection to Annecy. From Geneva there is one direct train a day; the trip takes an hour and a half. AIR ALPES, a private airline serving the ski country, has direct weekday flights to Annecy from Orly Airport in Paris. AIR INTER, the domestic branch of Air France, flies daily from Paris to Lyon. Rental cars are available.

What to See: The mountains, the lake, and the wonderfully pure air are Annecy's major tourist offerings. Fishing, sailing, swimming (in both pool and lake), tennis, hiking, biking, and golf can be enjoyed throughout the area. "Promenades," as one would expect in so French a place, are a way of life—along the lake, in the woods, and in Vieil Annecy, the picturesque old city with its cobblestone streets, canals, and old houses and churches, some dating from medieval times. St. Francis de Sales, a native of Annecy and its bishop from 1602 to 1622, laid plans for the construction of several churches and monasteries

that are now part of the town's heritage.

In the Area: The mother house of the Carthusians, LA GRANDE CHARTREUSE, nestles in an isolated valley fifteen miles north of Grenoble, sixty miles from Annecy by superhighway. It is here that the famous liqueur Chartreuse is created from a secret formula that has never been divulged and is impossible to discover by chemical analysis. A visit to the monastery and distillery is possible in the late spring, summer, and early fall; the roads become impassable in winter. The revenue from the sale of Chartreuse is used by the Carthusian monks to support many charities in the area.

Magnificently situated at the foot of Mont Blanc, CHAMONIX, the French winter sports capital, is about sixty miles to the east. The road is open year round. Chamonix boasts the world's highest aerial cable car—an exhilarating ride. The MER DE GLACE (Sea of Ice) is a sixteen-square-mile glacier near Chamonix, a tourist attraction of unusual beauty, glistening with ice needles and crevasses.

Where to Stay: There are many hotels in Annecy and dotted along the

shores of the lake, ranging from the most luxurious—LES TRÉSOMS ET LA FORÊT, situated on the lake, with an elegant restaurant serving classic French cuisine—to more modest pensions and hotels. A booklet, available from the French Government Tourist Office, 610 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10020, lists hotels in every category with information about facilities and prices.

The Climate: The average temperature in March–April is 56° F; May–June, 71° F; July–August, 78° F; and September–October, 64° F. Annecy, sheltered by the surrounding mountains, has an almost perfect climate—crisp winters; bright, flowery springs; cool, sunny summers; and autumns with golden light and wood fires to sit by and dream of the skiing.

Note: Information about Madeleine Kamman's classes is available in a booklet giving dates, tuition costs, types of instruction, facilities, visa requirements, and a registration blank. Write or call Deirdre Davis, Modern Gourmet, Inc., P.O. Box 123, Newton Centre, MA 02159; telephone 617/969-3577 after 8 P.M.

—Kate Terry

